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# “Everything Around Here Belongs to the Kolkhoz, Everything Around Here is Mine”<sup>1</sup> –

Collectivism and Egalitarianism: A Red Thread Through Russian History?

PETER LINDNER and ALEKSANDR NIKULIN

## Introduction

One of the peculiarities of Russian history in the 20th century is that it can be interpreted as the history of fundamental change as well as one of straightforward development. It requires only a slight shift of perspective to emphasize either the stability of cultural foundations that are not only concordant with the principles of the October revolution but actually have to be understood as one of the reasons that brought it about, or to see a historic break, leading to an entirely new political, economic, and social order. The more the continuity of a process that has its roots in the persistence of cultural norms and traditions is highlighted, the more likely it seems that the problems of transformation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union have to be traced back to exactly the same cultural norms and traditions.

“Egalitarianism” and “collectivism” are the decisive catch-words that constitute this continuity and pervade the history of rural Russia, the prerevolutionary land communes,<sup>2</sup> and the Soviet collective farms. They set up a framework that gives meaning to singular sociohistorical incidents by identifying same common roots and weaves a red thread through Russian history: For example, that in Soviet times a person was very rarely excluded from a collective farm because of misbehaviour, although the legal regulations provided for this; that in the presidential elections of 1996, a disproportionately high percentage of inhabitants of rural areas voted for Gennadij Zjuganov, the candidate of the communist party; or that after 1991, only very few workers of collective farms were willing to start individual farming – all these events can now be ordered around an identical interpretative centre. Egalitarianism and collectivism are its key notions

and the subjects of a long-lasting academic discourse that produces “peasant icons,”<sup>3</sup> which can subsequently become part of the self-identification of those whom they originally described (KOTSONIS 1999, p. 11).

It is this *threefold explanatory power* – the suggestion of continuity, the provision of a readily available framework for the interpretation of single events, and the use as a pattern for self-identification – that permits, in my view, the characterisation of “egalitarianism” and “collectivism” as a “meta-narrative” of the history of rural Russia. Consequently, the term should first be understood as a reflection of the fact that concepts such as these always bear the *potential* for reification (YANEY 1985, p. 33) rather than an overall judgement about a “right” or “wrong” depiction of reality.<sup>4</sup> In short: They possess the power to influence attitudes towards the past, interpretations of the present, and politics for the future. How liberal reformers in Russia saw the collective farms and respectively tried to privatise and reorganise them after the dissolution of the Soviet Union is a good example of this.

The aim of this article is to break up the notions “egalitarianism” and “collectivism” and thereby the idea of continuity in the history of rural Russia by asking to which social norms, institutions, and practices they usually refer. We agree with SMITH (1989, p. 338), that studies of the socialist world, in particular, necessitate a refocusing of our “regional lens”, the paying of “due attention to those socio-economic and political processes which make places different”. This is notably true for rural Russia and the village communities before as well as after 1917 and we therefore put special emphasis on territories and places, and the degree of their autonomy with regard to their

integration into broader economic and political environments.

The first part of this paper provides a short outline of how the understanding of rural Russia is shaped by a variety of texts that are different in all respects – in theoretical and methodological approach as well as empirical foundation – except in their emphasis on egalitarianism and/or collectivism. It would be a challenge for an “Archaeology of Knowledge” (FOUCAULT 1972) to correlate these works, trace some main lines of argument, unveil common references and recurrent contexts, and point to hidden contradictions and the mechanisms of their incorporation. But, given the limited space here, only a fairly selective number of examples must suffice to characterise some key focuses of this meta-narrative. By focussing on their territorial moorings and their relationships to the outside world, the second and third section then explore the different ways in which collectiv-

<sup>1</sup> Refrain of the famous Soviet song “*Dorožnaja*” by S. A. Vasil’ev (text) and I. Dunaev (melody), written in 1947.

<sup>2</sup> In the following we use “village community” (*mir*) as a general term, “land commune” (*obščina*) to emphasize the periodic redistribution of land in village communities, and “rural society” (*sel’skoe obščestvo*) for the administrative body of self-government created in the reforms of 1861.

<sup>3</sup> Although we agree in general with FRIERSON’s (1993) innovative work on “Peasant Icons: Representations of Rural People in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia,” we differ with her inference that the icon of the “communal peasant” was a “failed image” that “did not effectively contest the image of the rational peasant” (FRIERSON 1993, p. 6, 115).

<sup>4</sup> However, we frankly admit that the notion “meta-narrative” and consequently the purpose of this paper remain somewhat ambivalent between a pure depiction of an interpretative framework and a more critical analysis of a reality-shaping image or even a mere stereotype. It is not by accident that a similar ambivalence holds true for SAID’s analysis of the orientalist discourse: On the one hand, his “project has been to describe a particular system of ideas, not by any means to displace the system with a new one” (SAID 1995, p. 325) but, on the other, it contains the momentum of critique, unveiling the ideological content of the prevailing images and calling for alternatives.

ism and egalitarianism as practices of everyday life were embedded in changing structural frameworks. As a vantage point for comparison, we take the time after the emancipation statute of 1861 and the Brezhnev period, because both preceded state attempts to overcome collectivism (the Stolypin reforms of 1906 and Gorbachev's perestroika) and therefore stimulated new debates among scholars. Again, there is no place here to account for differences, for instance, between regions or the status of peasants (crown peasants, state peasants, landlord peasants), which are, without any doubt, of enormous importance. We conclude that collectivism and egalitarianism might not be the wrong denotations when used in specific contexts, but it is exactly these changing contexts that define their meaning, and consequently they can not be used as evidence for cultural continuity in rural Russia.

#### **Collectivism and egalitarianism: Meanings and contexts**

A discursive superelevation of the egalitarian character of rural Russia has a long standing history. As early as the first half of the 19th century, the so-called "Slavophiles" emphasized the high valuation of the community in the land communes as the central trait of the Slavic people. They traced its cultural roots back to an unspoiled agrarian society and argued that "the Russian finds his real, genuine, the old Russian, slavic, pre-Petrinien culture in the countryside, its bearer is the peasant" (MASARYK 1913, p. 214). August Haxthausen, the famous traveller and researcher by order of the later Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm IV, had characterised this society using the notions of "equality," "family community" and "patriarchy". Gradually the aspect of patriarchy had faded out in most depictions and, instead, equality was highlighted and regarded thereby as a foundation for historical processes but not as their possible outcome or content (GOEHRKE 1964, p. 37). The fascination with the prerevolutionary land communes, which extended far beyond the inner circles of the Slavophiles, was essentially nurtured by this image of an equal and just rural society and received a highly moral undercurrent as it was juxtaposed to western liberalism, capitalism, and social Darwinism (FRIERSON 1993, p. 10, 101ff): "We are not bourgeois, we are peasants ... we are poor in towns and rich in villages" as Alexander HERZEN in 1856 put this moral superiority in an introductory article for his almanac "Polar Star" (HERZEN 1856, p. VII). In this context, it is not surprising that *obščina*, the Russian word for the land commune, which emphasizes primarily the equal distribution of fields but is often used as a synonym for village communities (*mir*) in general, was invented within a scholarly discourse and was rarely used among the villagers themselves (GRANT 1976).

The prominent position that the land communes held in public discussions as well as on the political agenda in the 19th century forced Marxism, too, to deal with this topic, namely with the question of whether the land communes could be directly transformed into the "higher form of communist property" (MALE 1963, p. 234). MARX and ENGELS themselves addressed this issue in the foreword to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1882 and stated: "If the Russian revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West so that both complement one another, then the Russian collective property in land can be the vantage point for a communist development" (MARX a. ENGELS 159, p. 576). Lenin's approach was at once much more ambivalent and pragmatic, acknowledging that the land communes were an important part of the "rural condition" and necessitated concessions like those made after his death in the land decree of 1928 (KINGSTON-MANN 1983, passim). It was not until nearly a century later that Emmanuel TODD attributed to rural collectivism and egalitarianism an exactly inverse but much more central role in the implementation of communism. He sees them not as potentials that could have helped to implement the new order, but as the very reasons for its fast acceptance in Eastern Europe: Communism for him is the result of the "transference to the party state of the moral traits and the regulatory mechanisms of the exogamous community family" (TODD 1988, p. 33), which is characterised by equality between

brothers (and authority of the head of a household).

The Slavophile position might be regarded as too essentialist, the Marxist as too pragmatic (in practice) and ideological (in theory), and TODD's structuralism as too far from the realities of everyday life to allow for a more detailed analysis of the concrete routines and practices to which collectivism and egalitarianism as theoretical concepts refer. But this is certainly not true for an impressive number of recent publications that can be assigned to the loose framework of the "new paradigm in the study of the Russian peasantry" (PALLOT 1999, p. 15; see also KINGSTON-MANN 1991).

1. These works are, first, characterised by a focus on the traditions, norms and rules that governed peasants' *everyday life* at the turn of the century. They try to stay as empirical as the available sources allow and aim to understand peasants' behaviour within its own rationality. And they put high emphasis on the peculiarities of the times, regions, and contexts of their subject. Collectivism and egalitarianism, although still prevalent in many of these works, lose their character here as an underlying attribute of peasant culture and become meaningful strategies for making allowances for the demands of a peasant economy as well as balancing them with the changing challenges of the outside world. To give a few illustrative examples, PALLOT analyses, how "peasant attachment to collectivism" (1999, p. 249) translated into specific responses to the Stolypin reforms and those among the villagers who were willing to leave the commune. FRANK (1987) and WOROBEK (1985, 1987) show the extent to which peasants' customary law and popular justice were based on a differentiation between community members and outsiders and point out, that how popular justice was exercised tended to reinforce the inner coherence of the commune. FIGES takes the communal ploughed land as a vantage point to shed more light on the "deeper sense of collective well-being and mutual responsibility" (1986, p. 95) than does the

prevailing concentration on the redistribution of land. And ATKINSON (1990) directly addresses the question of how peasants' ideas of justice and equality are rooted in an understanding that deduces the right to land from the willingness and ability to work it.

2. Second, most of these works build on the assumption of the existence of a *separate peasant world* (COX 2002, p. 574; PALLOT 1999, p. 15), a "microcosm dominated by local interests" (MIRONOV 1985, p. 458), a divide between "peasant and official culture" (FRANK 1987, p. 265) and the "relative insularity of the Russian village" (WOROBEC 1991, p. 22), on "peasant particularism" (SEREGNY 1991, p. 341), "regional loyalties" (JOHNSON 1990, p. 90) and a "local society" with "local activities" and a predominant representation of "local interests of the village" (ALTRICHTER 1984, p. 100). But these and many other similar formulations suggest a consensus, which, in fact, does not exist. They draw to a varying degree on spatial metaphors that serve to express three quite different aspects or concerns:

- A rejection of all kinds of universalist approaches, namely the subjection of their subject matter to the framework of Marxist or modernisation theory.
- An emphasis of the distinctive implications of agrarian livelihoods, often explicitly referring to the work of SCOTT and describing them as a "moral economy" (1976), the members of which had to rely on the "weapons of the weak" (1985).
- A highlighting of the fact that rural areas consisted, in the eyes of their inhabitants, of a mosaic of distinctive units in the form of land communes, each of which defines a separate sociospatial lifeworld for its members.

It is in the second and third of these concerns that the concepts of collectivism and egalitarianism are inextricably moored in a spatial construction of identity, building on the assumptions of highly localised economies and territorially disjointed village communities in rural areas.

The establishment of a socialist political system in Russia, then, provided for an entirely new point of departure. On the one hand, empirically founded research was, with some remarkable exceptions, such as HUMPHREY (1983), not possible for western researchers, and Soviet scientists worked mainly with different methodological approaches on different topics. On the other hand, egalitarianism and collectivism were now a central element of the official ideology and were therefore supposed to have become an integral part of Soviet culture after 70 years, especially in rural areas (LEVADA 1993, p. 66ff.). Some authors who worked extensively on the prerevolutionary land communes regard this as only the formalisation of what was popular culture before the revolution. "Popularly seen as a war against all privilege" argues, for example, FIGES (2002, p. 437) "the practical ideology of the Russian Revolution owed less to Marx – whose works were hardly known by the semi-literate masses – than to the egalitarian customs and utopian yearnings of the peasantry". Following this argument, what looks like Bolshevism is merely the "expression of the traditional social relationships of the Russian society like the collectivist tradition of Russian rural culture" (STUDER a. UNFRIED 1999, p. 90).

But more important, the highlighting of continuity in Russian history was considerably strengthened after it turned out that the privatisation of the collective farms met with much more resistance in rural areas than many had expected.<sup>5</sup> This is most clearly expressed by WEGREN (1994, p. 218f.), who has probably published, in the last ten years, more than anybody else in the West on the privatisation of Russian agriculture and is worth quoting at length: "... in order to understand the manner in which land reform is unfolding, ... it is necessary to refer to previous cultural norms from the Soviet and pre-revolutionary past in Russia. ... Awareness of cultural continuities allows us to understand why there has been no mass decollectivisation in the Russian countryside, despite some predictions in the West" – subsequent sections of his article are then entitled "collectivism" and "rural egalitarianism". The

title of a later publication (WEGREN 2000) poses the problems through the accusing question "Where is the Rural Elite?" and adds the thesis of a much too egalitarian legislation from 'above', thereby blaming the difficulties of agrarian transformation in general on a vicious circle of cultural norms and legislative framework.

Egalitarianism and collectivism, the positive antithesis to Western capitalism in the 19th century had now become highly pejorative notions which shaped post-Soviet agrarian politics. The government under President Yeltsin, not incidentally using prerevolutionary comparisons, saw the collective farms as "semi-feudal entities" resistant to any form of restructuring (NICKOLSKY 1998, p. 204),<sup>6</sup> but it is even more indicative that the Stolypin reforms of 1906, which aimed to break up the land communes, were discussed as a possible blueprint for privatisation nearly a century later (MACEY 1993, p. 98)! Reformist planners waited for the collectives to collapse and disappear (HUMPHREY 2002, p. 169), and the World Bank, together with the Moscow Agrarian Institute, worked out a model scheme for the privatisation of collective farms that clearly aimed not only at privatising but, beyond that, at splitting up the existing collectives (LERMAN 2001).<sup>7</sup> Reports about hostilities against private farmers, stretching from general scepticism over ostracism and theft (VAN ATTA 1993, p. 87), to burning haystacks and tractors (HIVON 1995, p. 18, 1998, *passim*) fitted only too well in this picture of an irrationally collectivist rural popula-

<sup>5</sup> In July 1993, the then minister of agriculture Viktor Chlystun predicted euphorically the establishment of 600,000 - 650,000 private farms with an average of 75 ha land each, amounting to 20 % of Russia's agricultural land by the end of 1995 (CRAUMER 1994, p. 339f.). In fact, in 1995, only 279,000 farms with an average size of 43 ha had been established (Goskomstat Rossii 2003, p. 410).

<sup>6</sup> "Feudal" itself is another widespread characterisation of the post-Soviet Russian countryside, which evokes the association of timeless continuity. In fact, it is in most cases used only to emphasise a highly unequal distribution of power, although some draw much further parallels (GAMBOLD MILLER 2003).

<sup>7</sup> This scheme was published as a "privatisation manual" (International Finance Corporation/The Overseas Development Administration 1995) in Russian and English with a print run of more than 25,000 issues and distributed free to all collective farms in Russia.

tion that punished any kind of 'individualistic' behaviour. Compared to these clear-cut statements, it is often quite vague, which social practices are included under the labels collectivism and egalitarianism in prerevolutionary and Soviet times.

### **The prerevolutionary land communes: Balancing local needs and external demands**

"No one was ever born *ν obshchine* [in the land commune] but rather *ν derevne* [in the village]" (LEWIN 1990, p. 21). This statement points to the important fact that the land communes<sup>8</sup> were first and foremost a territorially defined entity and not any kind of spatially dispersed social network although one notable exception began to gain in importance after the abolishment of serfdom in 1861: The migrants who lived in the cities, but who often still owned land in the communes and sent money back to their families, depending even in the cities on relationships of *zemljačestvo*<sup>9</sup> (BURDS 1991; JOHNSON 1990). The most important manifestation of this territorial identity – or at least the one that received the most attention in academic discourse – was the periodic redistribution of land among its members, using families, male workers, or 'eaters' as a basis for calculation. Although it was a response to the fact that the commune as a whole was responsible for fulfilling its tax obligation (*krugovaja poruka*), the redistribution of land and the equal apportionment of property among male heirs became widely-used points of reference for their presumed egalitarianism and collectivism. As some authors argue, although the practice of redistribution had been established for mainly pragmatic reasons it subsequently contributed to the "emergence of egalitarian ideas among the Russian peasantry" (MOON 1999, p. 220).

The periodic redistribution of land probably illustrates more clearly than any other function of the land communes their dual character: On the one hand, they had to serve the purposes of the landlords and the state, and on the other they constituted an institution of local self-government for the village communities. They had to pay their taxes to the

landlords, a sometimes quite heavy burden, as BOHAC (1991) impressively demonstrates, but beyond that, they had considerable freedom to regulate local affairs autonomously. This dualism made them a "mediator" and "broker" (BURDS 1991, p. 52) between local needs and external demands, an institution that shaped "locales" (GIDDENS 1995, p. 169f.) to a great extent by regulating their relationships with the outside world. This facet is rarely adequately acknowledged. We do by no means suggest that putting the focus on this aspect of the village communities opens up an entirely new interpretative framework. But it adds an additional perspective that highlights changes in the character of these communities and, at the same time, the nature of their presumed egalitarianism and collectivism.

Informal social control as a mechanism to maintain effective order is a common feature of small, localised communities all over the world (although it might work quite differently in different places) and played a huge role in Russian villages before and after the revolution, too. But beyond that, the land communes and their regular meetings (*schod*) gave the village communities an institutionalised forum for the negotiation of interests with clearly defined roles, rights, responsibilities, and procedures. The head of each household (*bol'shak*) had the right to vote in the meetings, which elected an "elder of the estate" (*starosta*), usually for three years, and often also representatives for other functions, such as tax collectors or guards. High emphasis was put on the unanimity of decisions and, after long discussions, could lead to the postponement to a later time of controversial questions (ZYRJANOV 1992, p. 30). Surely, the land communes were far from an ideal democratic institution. Widows were, for example, excluded from the assemblies, villagers without land were admitted only when their immediate concerns were discussed (KUCHUMOVA 1981, p. 337), and richer peasants tended to have an inordinately high influence (MACEY 1990, p. 222).<sup>10</sup> But they provided for a quite high degree of publicity for the processes of decision making.

The main issues dealt with in the assemblies were the repartition of

land and the distribution of tax burdens among the households. Because the character of repartitional land – after 1861 often seen as the ideal type of communal property – turns out to be trickier than it seems at first glance (LEWIN 1985, p. 9), it is highly doubtful that the land communes really prohibited the development of "individualistic and absolute notions of property rights" as MACEY (1990, p. 222) suggests. Except for juridical reasons, this was true because the period between general redistributions could often be longer than 10 years (PALLOT 1982, p. 16), investment in apportioned land, such as manuring, was rewarded in subsequent redistributions (WOROBEC 1990, p. 96), and the farmstead as well as the land around it (*usad'ba*) were usually held in hereditary tenure. Other functions of the commune, for instance the control of the adherence to an agreed crop rotation or the allocation of land for farmsteads to new households, might have affected private property rights in one way or another, but did not suspend them entirely by submission to communal control.<sup>11</sup>

The status of the land communes as a mediator and broker was considerably strengthened by the reforms of 1861. When Alexander II launched the emancipation legislation, he was quite aware that this posed the problem of establishing a new administrative regime in rural areas and he opted for the introduction of peasant self-government to save the state the expense

<sup>8</sup> There is no place here for a general description of the land communes, their history, and internal structures. For a very condensed overview with references to further readings, see EKLOF (1981) and MIRONOV (1985).

<sup>9</sup> *Zemljačestvo* refers to friendly relations among *zemljaki*, persons from one's native village or region (BURDS 1991, p. 92; JOHNSON 1990, p. 91). For BURDS, migration became such an important factor for the peasant economy that it necessitated a change in the conception of "community", generating a "third culture" (BURDS 1991, p. 53, 55).

<sup>10</sup> Local self-government is also often criticised for being corrupt (PERASON 1989, p. 21ff.), although distinctions are necessary here: Many reports refer to the *volost'*-level, the higher unit of self-government where relationships were far less personal and mechanisms of social control much weaker.

<sup>11</sup> An additional important duty before the introduction of an universal military service in 1874 that was also – like the collection of taxes – imposed on the commune by external authorities and involved a lot of bargaining among villagers, was filling the local quota of recruits for the army.

of providing bureaucratic supervisors for peasant communities (PEARSON 1989, p. 22). The newly created "rural societies" (*sel'skoe obščestvo*; sometimes referred to as "village societies" or "village communities") did not always coincide territorially with the land communes, which posed many administrative problems in the following decades. But, in most cases, the existing institutions took over the new duties, which meant, de facto, that many of the former rights and responsibilities of the landlords were transferred to the land communes (ATKINSON 1983, p. 22ff.). The elected representatives of the communes became members of higher-level administrative organs (*zemstvo* and *volost'*) and were, in return, responsible for the proper observance of the new laws in their villages. Duties, such as the maintenance of the infrastructure in the villages and some welfare functions were now officially handed over to the rural societies.

This legal-administrative situation set up a structural framework in which concrete practices of collectivism and egalitarianism were always embedded. "Neither the *zemstva* nor the government can help the people if they do not work and care for themselves" (quoted in FIGES 1986, p. 91) as one councillor at the time put it – and the commune was quite aware of that. Because they were collectively responsible for the fulfilment of external duties, in most cases any preferential access to the scarce local resources for one peasant would have meant disadvantages for all the others. When the commune tended to heavily control the acquisition of additional income from external sources (e. g. from labour migration to the cities), this was done not to keep to an abstract ideal of egalitarianism, but rather to avoid for its members additional burdens which could have originated from absenteeism and abandonment of land. The measures taken ranged, in this case, from the levying of a "departure fee" and annual payments, to refusal to issue the necessary passport, and the seizure of the property of the migrant (BURDS 1991, p. 66ff.). But there seem to have been no general efforts to avoid economic stratification.<sup>12</sup> Another example that represents a deep inroad into private

property rights was communal interference in traditional patterns of property devolution. But here, too, the reason was that it was necessary to maintain self-supporting, tax-paying households because of the commonly imposed tax obligations (WOROBEC 1991, p. 42ff.). In still other cases, communal activities were not as tightly bound to demands from the state or the landlords as was the case with taxes and military service. But they were usually also based on the need to share the burden for commonly used goods or infrastructure that otherwise simply would not have been available: To ploughing a part of the land communally was widespread at the end of the 19th century, and, except for paying taxes, the revenues were used for building grain stores, maintaining the school and the church, or supporting widows and orphans (FIGES 1986).

Most of the activities that reinforced communal identity were not decided from a "higher authority" within the commune but involved permanent processes of forming opinions and bargaining. The communal assembly was merely the formal organ that had finally to reach a decision, but it relied heavily on local "public opinion" (MIRONOV 1985, p. 444). That processes of bargaining characterised the relationship with the landlord, his representatives, or state officials, too, is shown by BOHAC (1991), who tracks these negotiations in great detail for the Manuilovo estate in the Tver province between 1810 and 1843. In a reciprocal process in which the commune played the role of a mediator, the local public developed its shared understanding of and position towards the outside world. The pool of common resources, common responsibilities, and a social institution essentially based on common participation made for the origin of what could be called a localised discursive formation, which was "public" in every sense of the word. It developed its own notions of "right" and "wrong", which were impressively displayed in the sometimes cruel practices of peasant self-justice (*samosud*). The appliance of different standards for insiders and outsiders (FRANK 1987, p. 241; WOROBEC 1987, p. 290) and the conviction that offences that threatened the agrarian basis of

subsistence, such as horse theft, were not sufficiently punished by official law (FRANK 1987, p. 264; WOROBEC 1987, p. 282) can be interpreted as expressions of that.

Although the end of the 19th century was surely a time of profound changes for the land communes, they kept many of their basic characteristics, at least until the eve of the Stolypin reforms of 1906; collectivism and egalitarianism as social practices of everyday life remained embedded in *local public discourses* that arose in response to a *considerable degree of autonomy* in meeting the requirements of *high external demands* on the one hand, and of a *strongly localised economy* on the other. These four aspects determined their very meaning and changed dramatically after the integration of the Russian countryside into the Soviet system.

### **"Vremja zastoja" – Time of the standstill: A double standard system at its height<sup>13</sup>**

"Everything around here belongs to the *kolkhoz*, everything around here is mine" – this refrain from a famous Soviet song from 1947 celebrates the achievements of socialism and describes the situation after the revolution; at least formally it is not entirely incorrect. The members of a *kolkhoz*, in contrast to the workers on a state farm, owned all the capital of their farm in common except for the land which was given to them for temporarily unlimited use. But when villagers quote this sentence today, often

<sup>12</sup> There are, of course, many reports of envy and hostilities against the "Kulaks" whose sources of income included trade and moneylending, but these reports are often "heavily influenced" by socialist revolutionary or Soviet ideology. PERRIE (1990), for example, argues that usually all socioeconomic strata took part in the peasant movement of 1905 which was directed primarily against the landlords. There were only "rare cases" where richer peasants themselves became victims of the riots, in others they "felt themselves to have more in common with their fellow-villagers than with the landlord" (PERRIE 1990, p. 204). Here, as in general (ATKINSON 1990, p. 9), the crucial criteria for peasant's sentiments about "justice" seem to have been whether somebody worked the land he owned himself or hired labour, not whether one was "rich" or "poor".

<sup>13</sup> The time of Brezhnev's leadership is, in Russia, called "*vremja zastoja*," the "time of the standstill". This section draws heavily on material that I collected during 18 months of fieldwork in Russian villages between May 2000 and October 2001. I wish to thank the German Research Foundation for its generous support of this project.

with a wink, it means that everything that belongs to the collective farm can be 'used' for personal auxiliary farming, borrowed in the best and stolen in the worst case.

The double entendre of this sentence sheds, in a symbolic way, a very accurate light on the situation in the collective farms. The introduction of the *kolkhoz* system made a deep and enduring inroad into the existing social and economic order in the villages. It represents the attempt to break up their localised character, to control them in a much more comprehensive way than had been the case under feudalism, to integrate them economically into the scheme of the planned economy and to foster the identification with the socialist normative system. But the fact that the sentence "everything around here belongs to the *kolkhoz*, everything around here is mine" could be quoted with full pathos at any official occasion as well as with a completely different meaning among friends makes clear that this attempt neither succeeded entirely nor led to a real amalgamation of the prerevolutionary land communes with the new collective farms. Instead it established, we would argue, a quite ambivalent relationship between the state, locally represented by the *kolkhoz*, the village community, and the private households. Cast now in the context of privatisation, this relationship is often called rural collectivism and egalitarianism.

This ambivalence was to a high degree nurtured and maintained by the sometimes antagonistic, but mostly symbiotic relationship between wage labour on the collective farm and personal auxiliary farming. After the revolution personal auxiliary farming as well as the collective farms were considered a transitional phenomenon that would, over the years, give way to state property as the highest form of property but by the time of Brezhnev, attempts in this direction had already been abandoned. Private life and a private sphere, which ideally were also to disappear in a socialist society had now become uncontested elements of the Soviet everyday life and constituted a powerful niche for the individual (STUDER a. UNFRIED 1999, p. 108, fig. 4). What ZASLAVSKY (1982, p. 126)

calls the "historical compromise" of the Brezhnev-era – abstention from mass protests in exchange for stable prices, zero unemployment, and modest improvements in standards of living – assumed on the collective farms the shape of an informal tit for tat. In spite of their miserable wages, the workers showed up more or less regularly at their workplaces and sold part of their privately grown products to the farms if they had problems fulfilling the state delivery plans. In return, they received various kinds of support for their personal auxiliary farming. This symbiosis existed in principle on a fully legal basis: The third "Model Collective Farm Charter" (see BRUNNER a. WESTEN 1970), which had been approved by the All-union Congress of the *Kolkhoz* Farmers on November 27, 1969, stated that the collective farms had to support the personal auxiliary farming of their workers (art. 42), for instance by helping them to buy cattle or supplying them with pastures (art. 43). It even allowed the distribution of land to persons not employed by the farm but living on its territory (teachers, medical orderlies, employees of the village administration ...), which was quite an important detail for the all-inclusive territorial power of the *kolkhozes* (art. 44). However, the concrete shape of these arrangements was rarely fixed in written form; instead it was either negotiated between the collective of workers and the farm management or agreed upon individually. These agreements opened up a huge arena for informal bargaining where the interests of the workers as farmers and of the chairman of the farm as a state representative collided. And the unofficial understanding of "everything around here belongs to the *kolkhoz*, everything around here is mine" makes clear where the workers had their priorities.

The parallel existence of two completely different but highly interdependent and spatially intermingled forms of production became one of the crucial characteristics of Soviet agriculture. The emergence of a respectively divided public sphere was its logical consequence. In a paradoxical way the mode of its formation parallels on a micro level of villages what has been described as the

establishment of a civil public sphere in eighteenth- and nineteenth century Western Europe (HABERMAS 1989). Unlike city dwellers, the livelihood of the *kolkhozniks* was still highly contingent on the utilisation of their private property, their small plot of land, and the sale of their products at more or less free prices in so-called *kolkhoz*-markets. For this, they depended heavily on the help of the collective farm, and, as private producers, they raised claims that often tended to be 'informal' if not illegal. This created a sphere, which we would call "*private-public*".<sup>14</sup> It could be found in the daily meetings of neighbours and friends, mostly in the kitchens of private houses and centred around prices on the local market, the availability of products on black markets, the compensation for having a *kolkhoz*-tractor work on one's private plot of land or for borrowing a chainsaw, or in the risk of getting firewood from the nearby forest, etc. Exchange of information as well as reaching a consensus about many crucial questions of the village life were the functions of this private-public sphere.

On the other hand, more closely tied to the *kolkhoz* and in part to the rural administration, an "*official-public sphere*" was established in the villages. This sphere mirrored the integration of the village communities into the political, economic, and ideological realm of the state. It had its place in the general meetings of the members of the *kolkhoz* and in *kolkhoz* festivities as well as in the so-called cultural centres, the village chorus, and in the youth organisation of the Communist Party. Of course, this sphere served in part as an instrument for the maintenance and reproduction of state power, but it was nevertheless not only for show but was as "real" as the private-public sphere. The nationwide Soviet ceremonies, for example, on the 1st of May had become as important a part of everyday life as the orthodox holidays, which were celebrated in spite of all official attempts to sup-

<sup>14</sup> We borrowed this term as well as "official-public sphere" (see below) from OSWALD a. VORONKOV (2003), although they use it with a slightly different meaning in an urban context.

press religion. Needless to say, the official-public and the private-public spheres were, in reality highly overlapping. It is much easier to separate them analytically than in social practices, but, even so, both reflected different, often contradictory, however simultaneously valid standards of power and legitimacy.

But the collective farms in rural areas were much more than sites of production and supporting infrastructure for personal auxiliary farming. They acted as comprehensive social institutions – referring to GOFFMAN (1972, p. 11), some even call them “total institutions” (GAMBOLD MILLER 2001, p. 152; Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology 2001, p. 82, 127) – that structured daily life on a spatially defined field of responsibility. The already mentioned third “Model Collective Farm Charter” attributed to them the duty to “improve the living conditions in rural areas” by building clubs, libraries, sport facilities, and educational institutions, to support the schools and kindergartens with the education of the children, to organise communal feeding, to back the village ambulances and doctors, to facilitate public transport and to care for public infrastructure, such as streets, electricity, gas, etc. (art. 41). This all-embracing character of the *kolkhoz* – it affected everybody living on its territory and involved many facets of everyday life – is responsible for the fact that patterns of relationships, which in urban environments usually define far reaching social networks, shaped in the countryside the character of the local community as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Only in this way could it become a true point of reference for identification, determining the meaning of “we” in rural environments.

The differences between the *kolkhozes* and the situation in the pre-revolutionary land communes are obvious: In fact, the villages were still confronted with high demands from outside, but they had lost their autonomy in meeting them. It was no longer the collective of all households that was held responsible for the payment of taxes, the delivery of products, and decisions about crop rotation, but the chairman of the collective farm as the local representative of the state. Not by accident,

chairmen were often posted from other regions. Starting with them, all kinds of demands and regulations trickled down through a sophisticated hierarchical system to each single worker. Now the state was no longer “outside” but had become present within the community in everyday interactions and was integrated even into personal auxiliary farming insofar as the ability to work one’s private plot depended on the support of the collective farms. What had been the local public sphere represented by the communal assembly and its elected elder had split up into a state-bound sphere of collective activities and a sphere of representation of private interests with differing standards of legitimacy. Finally, practices of peasant self-justice, which had so clearly expressed the peasants’ poor integration into state structures, disappeared during Soviet times.

“The notion of a Soviet cultural tradition may seem peculiar – even repugnant – to some. However, seventy years of active cultural and economic formation produced institutional forms particular (or particularly adapted) to Soviet society” argues ALLINA-PISANO (2003, p. 5). Especially in rural areas, a specific normative entanglement of “labour”, “income”, “justice” and “authority” seems to me to be a central part of that and raises serious questions about the assumption of a continuity of collectivism and egalitarianism. On one of the now restructured collective farms where I worked, the chairman earns not only approximately 20,000 \$ a month, but he also holds a position of uncontested authority on his territory. In a patrimonial manner, he determines the project for restructuring the former *kolkhoz* into an agro-holding company as well as the maintenance of the infrastructure in the village, but he also sets rules of behaviour in public spaces, advises workers to clean their private courtyards, or gives a loan to one household but refuses it to another. Driving around in his *Lada* car, he once told me how much he would like to have a big Toyota jeep instead. When we asked him why he did not just buy one, he answered: “What would that look like – the chairman of a *kolkhoz* in a Toyota jeep? I bought one for my son who

lives in the city but I can’t show up with a car like that here in the village!”

This short statement illustrates that it is less the highly unequal distribution of authoritative resources, than the public display of wealth that the chairman fears would really damage his image: Less his arbitrary interferences into the private matters of his workers, than the obvious fact that he brings in more money than one could earn with ‘honest’ labour. Being subjected to strict hierarchies was an integral part of the Soviet system and hardly put into question; income, however, was tied to a rather quantitative understanding of “labour” and “production” which would not allow for a truly pronounced differentiation. Even in pure theory, this did not mean egalitarianism in the sense of equal payments for everybody – “for good work, for better results – higher wages” states, for instance, the “Model Collective Farm Charter” (art. 27). In relative terms, ‘big’ socioeconomic differences, which could be found in each Soviet village, were usually accepted as long as they were traced back to hard work and abstinence from drinking. However, it restricted the corridor of socially accepted income variations, and it is not by accident that one of the most pejorative denominations in the official Soviet terminology – “speculator” – stands for a person who earns money without working.

Under the very peculiar circumstances that distinguished agricultural production in the Russian countryside in Soviet times, this specific linkage of a “just income” with a quantitative and easily comparable understanding of labour was highly problematic and influenced the character of the communities as a whole. A substantial share of the income of each household was the result of its personal auxiliary farming activities for which the preconditions were often set in

<sup>15</sup> The existence of a local community and that *kolkhoz* workers were also private producers constitute two preconditions for the origin of a public sphere fundamentally different from the situation in urban contexts. They are widely neglected in works dealing with the topic of a public sphere in socialist societies (see for example FOREST a. JOHNSON 2002; GARCELON 1997; GRÜTZMACHER 2002; KHARKHORDIN 1995, 1997; OSWALD a. VORONKOV 2003; ROLF 2002; SCHLÖGEL 1998; SHLAPENTOKH 1989; STUDER a. UNFRIED 1999).



bilateral agreements, partly discussed with others, but far from transparent to everybody. This, to some extent, hidden character of the individually differing arrangements for personal auxiliary farming, led to a comparatively high mistrust towards socioeconomic differentiation in general: Who knew for sure whether one's fellow villagers had perhaps been given much more favourable conditions to get what they needed for their houses and 'farms'? The reproduction and stability of the private-public sphere in the villages can, to a huge extent, be traced back to exactly this permanently felt lack of information.

The role of the collective farms was thus highly ambivalent. On the one hand, they were the core part of the state structures, that had thoroughly permeated and corroded the old village communities and served as a permanent mechanism of control. But on the other, they were the decisive local institution, which had the resources at its disposal to act in nearly all fields as a supporting infrastructure for the interests of the villagers, stretching from education for the children, health care, and public transport, to assistance for personal auxiliary farming and marriage celebrations. That the representatives of the collective farms lived in the villages, had their own children in the village schools, and were themselves dependant on help for their plot of land served to guarantee a real balancing of their functions. The resulting positive feeling among villagers of being tied together via the *kolkhoz* as a localised welfare mechanism contributed substantially to the evolution of a new kind of communal identity. One might call this "collectivism", but I doubt that it can be interpreted as an indicator for continuity.

## Conclusion

It is all too obvious to blame collectivism and egalitarianism for the difficulties encountered in the privatisation and restructuring of the collective farms in Russia. As key concepts of socialist ideology, they are part of a past that privatisation aims to overcome. And, as the essence of a century-old rural culture, they constitute obstacles that can not be removed overnight. As plausible as

these arguments are, it is necessary to contextualise them by relating them to concrete social practices and their structural environment. Once we do this, it seems to me, the image of continuity that the transhistorical use of the term evokes dissolves, and the stereotype of collectivism becomes a multitude of collectivisms, which are not unified by a superordinated idea, but differentiated by the figurations and arrangements they depict. This is not to neglect a certain degree of path dependency in the actual developments in the Russian countryside, but rather to call for searching for the path on the ground instead of using outdated, prerevolutionary maps or never realised, Soviet sketches.

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